



# The Impact of Covid-19 : From a Culture of Teaching Towards a Culture of Learning

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# **The Impact of Covid-19: From a Culture of Teaching Towards a Culture of Learning**

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## **Abstract**

*The year 2020 will be remembered for Covid-19 – the period of ‘forced’ critical reflection upon ourselves, others and the society around us. This paper presents the positive and negative practices during this period by focusing on the educational system at the tertiary level where traditional teaching was substituted by e-learning. Based on personal experience and pilot research conducted with the students of South Slavic Studies, the paper further discusses the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning, paying special attention to the arts. Finally, it is concluded that e-learning will remain one of the educational approaches in future.*

**Keywords:** coronavirus, higher education, arts education, e-learning, learning and teaching

## **1. Introduction: how has coronavirus ‘touched’ us?**

*Resonance*, the title of the current issue of the journal *Inter-Faculty*, evokes a number of associations, some of which belong to different layers of vocabulary, including the terminology related to various science fields, such as physics, astronomy, chemistry, etc. (e.g. acoustic, electrical, orbital resonance), but also general vocabulary. If we share the same thoughts and feelings with someone else regardless of distance or closeness (e.g. a relationship), we *resonate with* them. Figuratively speaking, the word *resonance* means ‘an echo in the public, the impact of a publicly expressed idea or a suggestion, etc.’ (Matasović and Jojić, eds. 2020: 1132). In this paper we focus on this figurative meaning.

The coronavirus outbreak, which marked the year 2020, was the period of ‘forced’ critical reflection on numerous issues in society, on ourselves and others, as many

authors have already pointed out. We can mention at least two examples from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana: critical notes in the section *Reflections in the time of virus* (2020), especially the texts written by Robi Kroflič (2020a and 2020b), and also the ad hoc symposium *Everyday life in the time of epidemic. New experiences, ethnography and reflection* (2020). Everything that was happening, especially various measures imposed in both the public and private spheres, will in some way affect our lives in the future. This brings us closer to understanding the concept of resonance introduced by Hartmut Rosa, a German sociologist and political philosopher, who sees the main problem of today's society in alienation, not in acceleration nor in the glorification of deceleration. As he highlighted in the interview in April 2020, the concept of authenticity (and even identity) is to be replaced with the concept of resonance because we live harmoniously when:

[...] we let the stranger, the other, touch and move us and when we try to respond to that: only then can the bridge be built between us and the other and we can walk across that bridge together – but only if we change, since we never remain identical nor authentic compared to what we were before; instead, we become new and different (Roza<sup>1</sup> 2020).

The question arises as to how the time of coronavirus has 'touched' us, whether we have 'learned' anything and whether we have become 'different'.

One of the most frequent words during this period was certainly the word 'quarantine'. It is, of course, another type of quarantine from the one described by Gabriel García Márquez in his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* – an ode to Florentino Ariza's infinite love for Fermina Daza, who married another man. Their love is eventually realized in their old age with the help of a loyal captain and the cholera epidemic on the Amazon coast, which made the romantic cruise along the Magdalena river possible. Florentino Ariza had been waiting for that moment for more than fifty years. The two of them are the only two passengers on the steamship with a raised yellow flag. Since they are not allowed to disembark, they can finally enjoy their endless love in peace.

Unlike the quarantine described by Gabriel García Márquez, we suddenly found ourselves in home quarantine/self-isolation and were 'forced' to confront many

unknowns about coronavirus but also face the changes of our habits, daily routines and our lifestyles in general. From our homes we followed everything that was happening in ourselves and around us, not only in our country but in the whole world (hence the slogan *#stayhome*, later substituted by the slogan *#beresponsible* after the measures were gradually lifted). We also tried hard to organize a new way of life, completely unknown to us before. Reactions were both positive and negative. Concerning the positive ones, we should emphasize the fact, often highlighted in the media as well, that science finally became more important than politics and we trusted science more than politics. Moreover, instead of leading accelerated and rather alienated lives, we suddenly had more time for ourselves and our loved ones, for a virtual exchange of experiences, for helping others, for free access to culture, etc. Of course, there were quite a few negative outcomes, including anxiety and/or fear (to a great extent the result of aggressive media discourse), uncertainty and stress due to changed lifestyles, but also inability to socialize, lack of control over our own lives, encroachment on individual freedom, and so on.

Writers, artists and certain other professions did not experience these changes so drastically since they were used to some form of ‘self-isolation’ in their work, which they underlined in online interviews, diaries and their notes in relation to new life circumstances caused by the pandemic (e.g. The quarantine diary of the Croatian Writers’ Association, June 2020). However, along with other professions, they experienced cancellations of numerous professional arrangements (e.g. concerts, events, releases, ...). Despite this, they wanted to use their art to document the “distorted reality”, as the writer Ivica Prtenjača (2020) suggested, and at the same time to stimulate their creativity. Regarding teachers/professors at all educational levels, they invested most of the time to online pedagogical work, which was confirmed by our colleagues from both Slovene and foreign universities. Apart from teaching, professors are also expected to engage in scientific research, but there was almost no time for research studies, especially those that require great concentration. For that reason, in the following sections we will focus on our teaching experience and our students’ experience with e-learning during the coronavirus pandemic.

## 2. From traditional teaching to e-learning

The Bologna Process (2000-2010) established the unique European Higher Education Area, which enables mutual recognition of qualifications, promotes student and staff mobility and improves the quality of education among other things. From the very beginning the implementation of the reform process encountered numerous difficulties and the well-developed idea was not best implemented in practice. This is confirmed by the 2016 research results of EduCentar on the Bologna Process in Croatia. They indicate that the average time to degree is not shortened, that students acquire less knowledge, that they cannot find employment after the first-cycle degree programme, and so on. It seems that too much attention is given to various formalities, such as the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), to the detriment of content and study. As one of their respondents wrote, “students are now treated as older high school pupils” and not as those who study (EduCentar 2016); the Latin *studere* means to question carefully, to think critically, to delve into a problem, in short, to study. But then a drastic change occurred in the time of the coronavirus. Students finally started to *study* since *teaching* was replaced by *e-learning*, giving them more free time and flexibility to organize their studying. As a result, students became more responsible and more engaged, which is one of the positive outcomes of coronavirus.

What is our own experience and the experience of our students of South Slavic Studies<sup>2</sup> at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana with regard to e-learning in the time of coronavirus? As was already mentioned, we cannot talk about *instruction (teaching)*, but should use the term *e-learning* instead, since there was no interaction between professor and student(s), nor among the students themselves. We should also consider the two mitigating circumstances in our case, that is working with small groups of students and our decade-long experience with e-classrooms prepared for all courses, which proved to be a considerable advantage at the time (we do recognize, however, that it was also a major disadvantage and additional workload for professors who had never used such teaching methods before).

The easier task was to fulfil the formal and legal requirements of the educational process for the entire system (from primary school to faculty) and to share new information. In any event, this was only one teaching objective among many others,

such as initiating and maintaining live communication while at the same time implementing the study programme. How to substitute lively discussions in seminars; the most important and irreplaceable part of faculty teaching? Online consultation with each student individually was one of the solutions and possible only with a small number of students, which was the case with our groups.

Let us mention several things we need to bear in mind when it comes to e-learning. First, there is a constant need to motivate and guide students through the process of understanding the content and exchanging opinions while we apply different methods. For example, the problem-solving approach is an important method since students take different roles and approach various problems critically and creatively, and in this way develop empathy, collaboration, the ability to communicate, learning ability, etc.

We should also consider the ‘adaptation’ of the study programme to new circumstances (almost never discussed before). It mainly refers to the length of a lecture. E-learning experts suggest short lectures/presentations of up to ten minutes combined with different pedagogical strategies which include active student participation (pair work, short presentations, quizzes, etc.). On the other hand, adapting the programme can also refer to the ‘workload’, since the large number of assignments given to pupils/students presented one of the major problems. At the same time, it is also important to continuously monitor students’ work, to provide feedback and possibly to point out comprehension problems and to give suggestions for overcoming them. In addition, a number of open problems related to online assessment occurred and currently there are no optimal solutions.

Concerning the study of languages, literatures and cultures, we should not neglect any potential differences in language competence of students, and we should take into account the positive and trusting relationship among students and also between professors and students. As was highlighted, e-classrooms which are prepared in advance play an important role in e-learning. They should be well-structured and well-organized with clear and comprehensible instructions. They should be regularly updated with new teaching materials which are useful, interesting and suited to specific groups of students, and adapted from generation to generation.

Finally, we could highlight other problems related to e-learning, such as technical problems or problems with (in)adequate training of teachers/professors and students in e-learning, etc. In any case, e-learning brought changes to both the students and the professors. Students needed to focus more on individual work and self-discipline and needed to be more responsible for their learning, while professors needed to devote more time to class preparation, assessment/correction of seminar papers, essays, various types of language assignments and also to devote more time to establishing and maintaining communication with students.

### **2.1. The arts as a ‘cure’ in the time of coronavirus**

The arts in general and arts education are known to have a prominent role in building a creative and culturally aware society, which is also mentioned in *The UNESCO Road Map for Arts Education*.<sup>3</sup> Not only does arts education develop a number of capabilities (creativity, communication skills, critical thinking, the promotion of cultural diversity, etc.), but the arts are, as the philosopher Alenka Zupančič (2019) underlines, something positive in society, something that gives us hope. During the cataclysmic crisis, the arts had a special role, which Marcel Štefančič (2002) described in the following way, using music as an example:

It is music that regulates thoughts and emotions. It is music that regulates and controls our fears and insecurities. It is music that gives you back a sense of time. That changes hours into minutes and minutes into days. That turns your life into a story. That makes you smarter, more fluid, more charismatic. That reminds you of the future. That supports you, wakes up your senses, calms you down, crystallizes you [...] When you listen to a song, you always have the feeling the whole world is listening with you (Štefančič 2002: 8).

Marcel Štefančič talked about music, but his words could refer to other arts as well, and this proved to be true during the coronavirus outbreak. The arts moved to social networks and, as a result, we could enjoy numerous concerts and performances by musicians online (e.g. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra introduced the Digital Concert Hall), we watched plays and films, listened to and/or read various literary works, took virtual museum tours, attended exhibition openings, and so on. Literally, *the arts came to us*<sup>4</sup> and we consumed it more than

ever before; it was a cure offered to us for free. Let us also mention two creative examples from Croatia. The primary school teacher Ivan Petranović (2020) thought of an original way to cheer up his pupils in the centre of Zagreb, who were at home in quarantine because of the lockdown. He regularly visited them and sang in front of their windows. Then, the musician Damir Urban (2020) rented a colourful sightseeing tour bus with his band so they could go and play at different locations around the town of Rijeka (which were kept secret in order to comply with the lockdown measures). In performing mini concerts in the streets, in front of the windows and balconies, they wanted to entertain the local people during “these strange times”. and to reward their loyal audiences for coming to their concerts before the coronavirus outbreak by visiting them instead.

Learning a language cannot be separated from learning a culture which is represented in different forms of art. By learning a language, we learn the culture and we learn about the culture or the ‘context’ in which communication in the foreign language takes place (Kramsch 1993: 177). Since artists offered us different forms of art, we could enjoy the beauty but also use the arts to learn foreign languages. For that reason, the students were given various assignments on a weekly basis, including the following: watching virtual theatre plays, going to exhibitions, listening to literary texts interpreted by different actors, going to concerts, etc. There was actually no need to ‘travel’ to the countries whose languages, literatures and cultures they were studying (Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bulgaria). Even though live interaction cannot be compared to the virtual one, it seems that this experience will be a useful tool in the future.

## **2.2. e-learning from the student perspective**

The educational system from primary school to faculty will, undoubtedly, never be the same due to the fact that we abruptly switched from traditional teaching to e-learning in the time of coronavirus. It is quite normal that the reactions were both positive and negative, even unexpected. For example, there was an interesting comment from one primary school pupil attending eighth grade, who literally ‘longs for’ school and teachers and cannot wait to go back to school, since at home she only sleeps, eats and does school assignments. Another example is a comment by one parent who, for the first time, saw his teenage son reading a book



of fiction. In this paper we were interested in the experiences of our students during the Covid-19 quarantine and also in their experience with e-learning. The students described their experience and reflections within the course *Stylistics*. As an example, we cite one such description written by Elija Zavadlav, a third-year student at the BA level, who gave permission for the extract to be published:

The period I spent in quarantine was unusual, certainly unexpected, but all in all, not that difficult. [...] Apart from studying, I also dedicated quite a lot of time to myself and self-knowledge. In my opinion, this period, marked by the crisis, was an ideal opportunity to turn to oneself. It was impossible to think about the world that actually stopped, but we had the basics and that was enough for us. We could learn a lot from this. The pandemic was (and still is) an opportunity for humanity to learn about modesty, since we are to be blamed for this situation. Let it be a warning to all of us how to treat nature in the future.

Reading, listening to music and learning were my main allies. Being physically active and arranging my living space also played an important role and helped me find inner peace. Of course, it was not fun, I missed the faculty and a traditional way of studying, and also interaction with other students and professors. Students certainly had 'much more time' for learning, but given the situation around us, we were not in the right state of mind. I am convinced that a traditional way of studying, that is, going to the faculty and attending the lectures, is more effective and beneficial.

Elija Zavadlav

As can be concluded from the description above, but also from conversations with other students, colleagues and friends, the majority emphasized that this was a period of critical reflection; an opportunity to appreciate other things and change our regular habits and lifestyles, even education, since traditional university teaching was substituted by e-learning almost overnight. With respect to this change, we conducted an online survey<sup>5</sup> with the students of the South Slavic Studies at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana in June 2020.<sup>6</sup> The survey questions centred around several topics: a) technical equipment and the skills for using e-tools, b) general questions about e-learning, c) the implementation of e-learning, and d)

the questions related to testing and assessment. In the next section we briefly summarize only the survey results pertaining to topics b) and c).

More than half of the respondents (60%) reacted positively to the news about the implementation of e-learning; while 30% were neither positive nor negative; and only 10% reacted very positively. When the respondents compared traditional university teaching with e-learning, 80% claimed that they needed more time for e-learning; 10% needed much more time; and the remaining 10% needed exactly the same time. Concerning the productivity of e-learning, 60% of the students thought productivity was lower; 30% noticed no difference between university teaching and e-learning; while only 10% thought productivity was higher. Based on their own experience with e-learning, 40% did not support this educational method; 40% chose both answers; while only 20% supported it.

We were also interested in their answers to an open-ended question about the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning compared to traditional university teaching. The students emphasized several advantages, including:

- accessibility and flexibility in organizing their own time, especially if the lectures are recorded (students can listen to the lectures at any time; the lectures can be paused and later resumed so that students can organize their notes, for example);
- more time for studying, since students do not have to go to the university and they do not have empty timetable slots between lectures.

There were many more comments on the disadvantages of e-learning:

- a lack of interaction with professors and fellow students, which makes the learning environment monotonous;
- a lack of motivation and/or a low level of motivation; in contrast to e-learning, at the university students are forced to work and hence more motivated in the different working environment;
- a lack of explanations from the professors;
- e-learning takes more time than university teaching;

- e-learning is implemented in too many different ways; it should be uniform – either online lectures or individual work (implementing both is considered to be unproductive); ‘live’ lectures seem to be more productive;
- speaking activities do not accomplish their goal because it is impossible to keep up online ‘real’ conversation due to problems with understanding, articulation, a lack of non-verbal communication, and so on;
- too much individual work (and less work in groups) and too much time spent on such work;
- more concentration is needed for e-learning as well as more self-discipline, which students did not always have in the given circumstances;
- limited access to scientific literature;
- too much time is spent in front of the computer, which harms both physical and mental health;
- the invasion of privacy;
- unequal technical conditions and technical equipment, which are necessary for successful and effective e-learning, e.g. poor internet connection, interruptions during lectures (Zoom), etc. All this slows down class dynamics and can be annoying, especially during language classes.

Let us turn to the detailed results related to some of the above-mentioned advantages and disadvantages of e-learning highlighted by our students. In terms of motivation, the results show that it was much lower (40% of the respondents), the same as before (30%), lower (20%) and higher (10%). We also noticed that our students became more responsible for learning during Covid-19 as they attended online lectures regularly, submitted all the assignments, studied the literature and materials carefully before lectures, etc. However, contrary to our expectations, we were surprised by the result concerning the responsibility for learning which shows that it did not increase for 50% of the respondents (of the other 50%, 30% chose both *yes* and *no*; 20% chose *yes*). Interestingly, the exam results were approximately the same as before.

The students also rated different statements about e-learning on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). The results suggest that e-learning requires: a high level of self-discipline (the mean score – 6.3 out of 7); a lot of individual work (5.5); effective time management (6.2); more preparation for online communication (4.4); but that it also enables studying in depth (4.0). All the statements regarding

e-classrooms were rated very high (more specifically, from 6.1 to 6.4), such as: e-classrooms are user-friendly, well-structured and well-organized, e-classrooms are useful, e-classrooms have clear and comprehensible instructions. The students were also satisfied with teaching materials in e-classrooms (on average, rated from 5.4 to 5.9), which are useful, appropriate, interesting, detailed enough and not too demanding. The students emphasized that there were more materials distributed in e-learning settings compared to traditional teaching (40% of the respondents), that there was the same number of materials (40%) and that there were less materials (10%). Moreover, they were generally satisfied with how professors organized their work and adapted to the online environment, but also with how e-learning was implemented (5.5-5.8). However, when asked whether e-learning should be used as the only method in ‘normal’ circumstances, 40% disagreed (of the other 60%, 30% answered *neither agree nor disagree* and 30% agreed). On the other hand, 70% would accept a combination of e-learning and traditional university teaching in the future (of the other 30%, 20% thought such a combination unnecessary, while 10 % thought it crucial).

### **3. Conclusion**

We can conclude by stating that the coronavirus pandemic upset our everyday life, including traditional higher education which had to adapt to the new situation instantly. The period of adaptation, and the implementation of e-learning varied from university to university, from faculty to faculty, from professor to professor, and finally, from student to student. Reactions to such a pedagogical approach were also mixed, from extremely positive (independence, accessibility, flexibility in terms of time, place and pace of learning) to extremely negative as summarized in a short text entitled *Requiem for the Students* written by Giorgio Agamben (2020). The author talks about the end of studenthood as a form of life, which has existed for almost ten centuries and is nowadays being substituted by technological barbarism, resulting in people endlessly staring at a screen. He believes that all the professors who agreed to hold their courses only online “are the perfect equivalent of the university teachers who in 1931 swore allegiance to the Fascist regime”, and suggests to students who truly love to study that they should “refuse to enrol in universities transformed in this way, and [...] constitute themselves in new *universitates*.”

Finally, regarding the difference between traditional teaching and e-learning from the student perspective, our research confirms the results obtained by Alenka Tratnik (2016) in 2014/15, which show that students are more inclined towards traditional classroom-based instruction. We agree with the author who proposes that teachers should combine traditional methods with e-learning (together with other methods of course) and exploit the best of both approaches in order to achieve greater dynamics and efficiency in higher education. It is clearly evident that traditional forms of teaching cannot satisfy the needs of higher education today, especially after the experience we have recently gained by abruptly implementing e-learning in the pedagogical process.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the quotation is taken from the article written in Serbian, the surname Rosa is cited in the bibliography as Roza, which is a transcribed version in Serbian.

<sup>2</sup> During the studies, students acquire language competences in one of the South Slavic languages, where the focus is either on Croatian (contrasted with Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin) or Macedonian (contrasted with Bulgarian), together with competences in literature and culture of these languages.

<sup>3</sup> This policy-guiding document was designed at The World Conference on Arts Education entitled *Building Creative Capacities for the 21st Century*, held in Lisbon in March 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Using the slogan *The arts coming to you*, The Croatian Radio Student created a Facebook group, currently with around 12,000 members, who share various links and information related to culture.

<sup>5</sup> We used the application for online surveys Ika ([www.ika.si](http://www.ika.si)), Centre for Social Informatics, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to sincerely thank my colleague Tatjana Balažic Bulc for helping me with the survey.

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